



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Architectural Association School of Architecture, May 2018

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the Architectural Association School of Architecture has made acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance the higher education provision since the previous May 2017 [monitoring visit report](#).

Changes since the last QAA review/monitoring visit

2 The Architectural Association School of Architecture (the School) recruited 729 full-time students to its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for 2017-18. This is a reduction of 27, or just over 3.5 per cent compared to the 2016-17 intake. The 2017-18 total includes 431, or 59 per cent Tier 4 Sponsored international students. The programmes are taught by a total of 234 full and part-time academic staff. Significant changes since the 2017 monitoring visit include the appointment of a new School Director, who will take up the post in July 2018. In addition, the committee structure is being reviewed and recruitment to the taught MPhil in Media Practices has been suspended for the current year.

Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The School has made acceptable progress based on the following findings. Good progress has been made on completing or further advancing the good practice, recommendations and affirmations arising from the 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)), as well as the key matters arising from the 2017 monitoring visit (see paragraphs 4, 5 and 7). The School has recognised the need for further progress to fully embed the rigorous use of achievement data in the monitoring of standards and to ensure the consistent implementation of its initiatives to enhance the annual monitoring and review of its programmes (see paragraphs 6 and 11-14). The admission of students is managed highly effectively (see paragraphs 8-10) and the School continues to make good use of external reference points, both academic and professional (see paragraphs 17 and 18).

4 The very high level of support for students, which was reported as good practice from the 2016 HER (AP), has been further enhanced. A notable initiative is the introduction of mental health first aid services. The arrangements for providing additional academic support have benefitted from improved awareness, a referral procedure and the ready availability of one-to-one support from the Head of Teaching and Learning. These developments are highly valued by students.

5 The School has taken further action on some of the recommendations from the 2016 HER as a result of continued internal monitoring. All stages of the professional exemption programme in the Undergraduate School are now aligned with the relevant levels of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. The new process for overseeing the design and development of undergraduate programme units has been implemented, while the criteria for the allocation of students to the units are now formally available and published in the new Quality Manual. The

Information Management and Review policy has been updated to incorporate a guide for the use of School social media and web logs.

6 In relation to the recommendation to make rigorous use of achievement and progression data in monitoring standards, progress include improvements to the detailed standard data sets. These are produced centrally for consideration in the annual monitoring reports of all programmes in the Graduate School and for the overview report only in the Undergraduate School. Staff recognise the need for further progress in ensuring the systematic use of the data sets. In the 2016-17 monitoring cycle, all of those required to report on data completed the Statistical Data Commentary section in the annual monitoring report template. However, there are significant inconsistencies in the rigour with which the data are used. Some reports include a clearly focused and reflective commentary on matters arising from the data, while others offer only a brief general comment with no direct reference to the figures in the data set. Termly progression figures are formally considered at key deliberative academic committees, including the Academic Board.

7 The School has continued to build effectively on the responses to the three affirmations that were reported on at the 2017 monitoring visit. The steps taken to formalise the School's approach to academic staff development have resulted in a growing level of staff engagement with the Higher Education Academy. Some 14 members of teaching staff are due to make final submissions for the award of Fellows, half of them Senior Fellows. The new policy for the nomination and appointment of external examiners is fully operational and included in the Quality Manual. The process for internal monitoring and review of the undergraduate programme has been further refined, following a review of the initial arrangements. Annual monitoring reports are produced using a revised standard template, and focused at programme level (see also paragraphs 12-13). The lines of committee reporting are clearly defined, with the annual monitoring reports being subject to detailed scrutiny by the Teaching Committee.

8 The School has fair and robust arrangements for the admission of students that clearly reflect the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education*. The arrangements are overseen by a designated team within the context of published regulations.

9 There are two distinct stages for admissions within the Undergraduate School. A review of each applicant's written application and design portfolio is followed, for those who are successful, by an on-site interview with two members of academic staff. For Graduate School programmes, applicants must hold an honours degree or a professional qualification in architecture or related discipline, and have previous working experience or evidence of research or publication. They are also required to submit a personal statement along with their written application. The School is careful to ensure that all applicants meet the UK Visas and Immigration minimum language requirements, based on the Common European Framework of Reference level.

10 Overall, the admission of students is managed professionally, with a high level of individual support. Clear records are maintained and students met during the visit confirmed that the admissions experience had been positive, helped by clear information and prompt support throughout the process. The effective admissions process contributes to progression and achievement rates in the School (see paragraph 16).

11 The School has a good range of formal procedures for the annual monitoring of programmes, which are briefly described in the Quality Manual. The procedures are managed within the framework of the School's committee structure, with specific reporting responsibilities assigned to the Undergraduate and Graduate Management Committees, the Teaching Committee and the Academic Board.

12 Annual monitoring reports are produced for each academic programme, as well as for the Undergraduate and Graduate Schools overall. The programme reports share a common structure, using a clear standard template and an explicit action plan. Programmes are also subject to rigorous external scrutiny, with Graduate programmes reporting annually to their awarding body and the Undergraduate School to its professional bodies.

13 Academic staff strongly endorse the revised annual monitoring report template, while acknowledging that some programmes are still adapting to its requirements. A scrutiny of the 2016-17 monitoring reports confirms that the quality of reporting is variable, particularly in the extent to which commentaries are evaluative and in the citing of supporting evidence, including statistical data (see paragraph 6). The School is monitoring the use of the template, with a view to improving its structure and targeting future staff training and support.

14 The School is looking to strengthen annual monitoring by introducing a standard format for reports from the professionally focused external examiners in the Undergraduate School. The new reporting template has been developed using the reports of Open University's external examiners for the Graduate School programmes as a reference point.

15 Students actively contribute to quality assurance and enhancement in a variety of ways, including representation on academic committees and regular feedback surveys. They attest to the value of the close working relationships with staff in enabling the prompt resolution of minor issues. Recent governance reforms ensure student representation on the governing body. It is indicative of the level of student engagement that there was student representation on the Search Committee in charge of the process of appointing a new School Director.

16 The statistical data provided with the annual return show consistent levels of retention and achievement over the three years between 2014-15 and 2016-17. The School's figures for 2016-17 are typical of the period as a whole, showing that overall retention was 98 per cent (622 of 632 students), with 94 per cent of those completing successfully achieving the end or stage qualification (583 of 622). Apart from one small graduate programme, all of the awards had a completion rate of at least 83 per cent.

Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

17 The School continues to make good use of academic external reference points, most notably through the ongoing mapping of policies and procedures against the Quality Code and adherence to the Open University's academic processes. Strong and regular use is also made of professional reference points, as evident in the positive interaction with its professional bodies, the Architects Registration Board and the Royal Institute of British Architects. In addition, the external professional links of tutors and the external members who participate on the key deliberative committees and Council, ensure a continuous engagement with professional practice.

18 The new Quality Manual has been structured around the expectations of the Quality Code, while the School is preparing to undertake further mapping of the provision against the Quality Code, *Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards*, in preparation for potential future changes to its regulations. The use of other reference points include engagement with the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) and the review of policies and procedures in preparation for the Office for Students' Regulatory Framework.

Background to the monitoring visit

19 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

20 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Stephen Harris, Reviewer, and Mr David Lewis, Coordinator, on 23 May 2018.

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557050
Web www.qaa.ac.uk